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TALK OF THE TOWN | SUGG BLOG 05.04.05

An Honest Tampa Tribune?

Al-Arian's attorneys say that would be a good idea

BY JOHN SUGG

Tampa Tribune news boss Janet Weaver had to eat crow last week: A reporter had fantasized part of a story on towing companies. The scribe's head is now spiked as a warning to other Tribfolk.

Weaver, in a front page mea culpa, declared that her newspaper longs "to be truthful, to be fair, to be credible." Passing off fiction as fact is certainly untruthful. Carrying water for, say, a foreign government and its disinformation agents -- while claiming objectivity -- is likewise dishonest. So is not reporting all of the truth or distorting the truth.

Weaver and her predecessors have never told readers about reporter Michael Fechter's journalistically unholy alliance with another nation's spooks and professional liars -- including, as I've disclosed, that Israeli officials were broadcasting specifics of Fechter's reporting weeks before publication.

Nor did Weaver address the Trib's most enduring example of distortion, Fechter's coverage of Sami Al-Arian. If she had, she would have had to explain a motion filed for the Trib on April 20 by attorney Gregg Thomas. The newspaper has somehow overlooked reporting on its own legal foray.

The motion seeks access to juror questionnaires in the Al-Arian case. "The public perception of these defendants, indeed of entire ethnicities and religions, reflected in these responses, is of immense public importance," Thomas intoned.

Al-Arian's defense filed a motion for a change of venue on Friday. It argues that the media -- the Trib and Fechter most egregiously -- have poisoned public perceptions of Arabs, Muslims and Al-Arian, who along with three codefendants, is slated for trial later this month.

The prosecution would love nothing better than to seat a jury from among the 500 prospects mailed questionnaires. Despite response after response reflecting extraordinary prejudice against Arabs and Muslims, and an equally extraordinary ignorance of facts, the government will argue that jurors can be

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fair.

The change-of-venue motion states: "[T]he Tampa Tribune, has saturated the community to the extent it is impossible to sit a fair impartial jury in this case. At the forefront of the publicity is the notion that somehow the community ... was unsafe because of the presence of Sami Al-Arian."

Certainly, the content of the questionnaires is relevant to any coverage of the trial. But the Trib's coverage is itself likely to be brought up in court. Al-Arian's defense attorneys have asserted to me that Thomas' motion to gain access to the questionnaires was more about gaining intelligence for the paper's own damage control than about acquiring background for a news report.

"The Trib has a long history of trying to get Dr. Al-Arian," defense attorney Linda Moreno told me -- at a recent dinner where the Trib editor overseeing Al-Arian coverage was present. That editor, Tampa newcomer Howard Altman, wasn't amused that Moreno had invited me to join the dinner. He asked that his comments remain off the record, and I'll honor that. Moreno made no such request.

Moreno told me that when she asked Altman about his feelings on the Middle East, he responded that he was disturbed that "my people are occupiers." That objectivity is commendable, and Altman has a record for fairness (although I couldn't find anything significant by him on the Arab-Israeli dispute). However, with the Trib already accused of a stridently pro-Israeli bias, it's easy to understand Moreno's concern over Altman's personal identification with one side. Could one even imagine -- at the Trib or any major American news organization -- turning over supervision of Middle East coverage to a journalist who proclaimed that Palestinians were "my people"? (Altman, in a later conversation at the dinner, did not dispute Moreno's characterization of his remarks; his exact response was believable, passionate eloquent, but off the record.)

According to Moreno, Altman asked to speak with her because the newspaper wanted to secure an interview with Al-Arian; the newspaper is planning a series on Al-Arian to be written by Fechter. But the interview ain't gonna happen. The defense won't talk to Fechter. And Al-Arian's team is wise to the Trib's disingenuous tactic of fielding other reporters to act as Fechter's go-between.

As The Miami Herald's senior writer, Martin Merzer, noted seven years ago, Fechter has routinely ignored "innocent" interpretations of events and consistently suggested "extremely dark forces were on the prowl in Tampa." When a federal immigration judge five years ago ruled that the feds had no case, and the government decided to drop the Al-Arian persecution (and released his brother-in-law, held for four years on "secret evidence"), Israel cranked up "intelligence" funneled through Fechter, and that led to the current case. Fechter also, according to producers for Fox News' Bill O'Reilly, slipped a highly one-sided account of Al-Arian to the network. That led to an O'Reilly ambush of Al-Arian, who had been enticed to the show to talk about Arab attitudes.

Fechter and his mentor, Israeli disinfo operative Steve Emerson (whose lies, deceptions, associates and funding have never been explored by the Trib), are glaringly obvious on where they side in the dispute.

The prosecutors, too. They want to eliminate all mention from the trial that Palestinians might have a grievance -- such as during 2004 Palestinian children were murdered at a rate 22 times greater than Israeli children, although media coverage, according to one study, rendered three times more space to the Israeli deaths.

Or: Israel recently honored nine of its agents who, in what is dubbed the Lavon Affair, in 1954 committed terrorist acts against American and British targets in Egypt - with the intent of blaming the atrocities on Arabs. By comparison, Al-Arian and the groups he is charged with supporting have never targeted American interests. You won't read about the Lavon Affair "honors" in the Trib (or the St. Petersburg Times for that matter).

I have long detailed Fechter's journalistic jihad. Just one example: When a Middle East newspaper

retracted an entire story in the late '90s that had claimed one of Al-Arian's associates belonged to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Fechter went on citing the story as proof of the membership. When I asked Fechter why he quoted a story whose authors had admitted it was false, he said that they hadn't specified exactly which portions were untrue.

The venue motion refers to the origin of Fechter's reporting, his account right after the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing that maladroitiy tried to link the incident to Al-Arian. The Trib has never corrected that awful falsehood.

Janet Weaver disputes the Al-Arian defense team notion that the paper sought the jury questionnaires for "damage control."

"We don't have any damage control we need to do," she said on Monday. But Weaver would not comment on questions about why the Trib's April 20 motion had not yet been reported, or on the Trib's past and future coverage of Al-Arian.

She should hire an independent ombudsman, or, even better, an Arab journalist to balance Fechter's coverage. But that's not likely to happen -- leaving Weaver with a big job restoring credibility to her newspaper.

For more on John Sugg's coverage of the Al-Arian case, see:

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